

Every Couple's Dilemma:

To be truthful? Or to protect feelings?

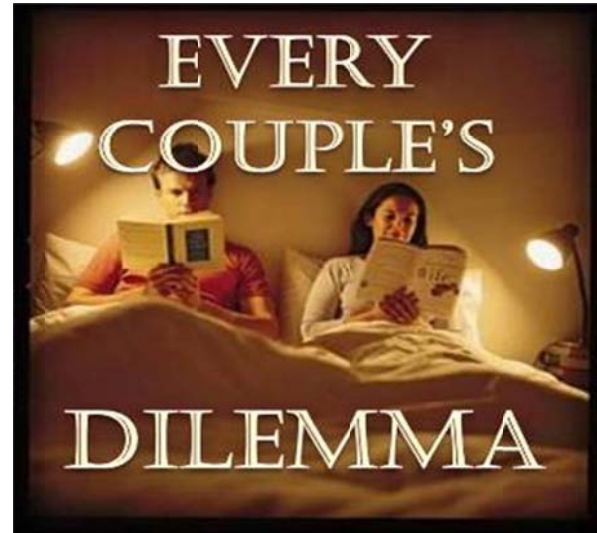
There are only two kinds of marriages - truthful and protective. You cannot be both at the same moment in time. They are a dilemma in the same way that it cannot be both night and day at the same time. We have no choice but to give up one in order to have the other. I cannot protect you from what you don't want to hear, and also be truthful about what's really going on inside me.

When you first got married, you started out aiming to be truthful. You told each other how you really felt, what you really thought and what you really wanted. You felt safe and love blossomed. Your trust felt deep and unshakeable.

However, you didn't really know each other. The first years were the big wake-up call. It was different living under the same roof, sharing the same finances, families and daily habits that grate on nerves. Conflicts occurred and truths emerged. How they got resolved determined whether you grew more truthful or more protective.

You stopped being entirely truthful about core issues. There was a simple reason - it hurt too much. You argued. It went nowhere. It wasn't worth it anymore. You began to distrust how your partner would react. You didn't want to upset him or her. Frankly, you didn't want to deal with the emotional pain yourself. It simply took too much time and felt too intense. Issues drifted, love dwindled and unhappiness set in.

Few couples can survive long term in mostly protective mode. Telltale symptoms begin to appear. Physical symptoms arise in the form of health problems for one or both partners. Unexplained illnesses appear that seem to be stress-related. Suppressing your feelings has that effect. Emotional symptoms also appear such as subtle digs and cold



shoulders. Like a cat baring her claws, couples learn to stay away from each other in case "truth" comes out! Partners avoid each other by working long hours, hanging out with friends, or being super-involved in sports or children's activities. Mostly, they stop communicating and tragically, they give up their closest moment together - making love. A 'roommate' arrangement settles in that seems to be handled better by one partner than the other. Often, the other partner is bursting inside, as suppressed feelings eat away at the very core of who they are.

Truth aches to emerge. Jesus said, "*The truth will set you free.*" (Jn 8:32) Being protective has prison-like qualities. You are safe behind a wall where your partner can't get in, but you can't get out either. At some point, at least one partner wants to break free and be truthful about how they really feel and what they really need and want. When he or she does, there is great danger. Five to twenty-five years of resentments and hidden truths want to explode out. Fear of what this explosion of truth will mean is what keeps the marriage anchored in protective mode.

Protective couples are advised to see a trained therapist, even if only one partner seeks help. Each

must grapple with their fear that being truthful will mean the end of their marriage. The fear of this consequence is understandable, with children, family, friends, financial security and a horrible feeling of failure and public shame all on the line. Yet to *not* be truthful about feelings, wants, needs and betrayals leads to loneliness, despair and even depression. Truth must emerge or the health consequences will be severe. A therapist helps heal past wounds that hurt.

Each partner needs to be truthful in a respectful way if they want to solve real issues and return to feeling loved and joy with each other. To do that, it helps to understand what caused truth in their marriage to die in the first place. "DDD" caused it. DDD is an anti-communication virus which we are all born with. In mild cases, couples can live with it. In acute cases, the couple is in serious jeopardy.

What is DDD? It is Deny-Defend-Deflect syndrome.

The DDD virus is wired into all of us from birth and its source is the ego. Common examples of DDD can be seen in everyday life at work and at home, with friends and with family. Yes, DDD causes problems there but nowhere greater than in one's marriage.

Deny-Defend-Deflect is caused by "truthful" criticisms and judgments that tear down mutual respect. They are our partner's implicit and explicit messages that we are screwed up and *not good enough*. These hurt.

"I did not say you are stupid!" Deny.

"Do you know where my shirt is?"

"I never touched your shirt!" Defend.

"Yeah, well I may be messy but you never do the shopping. I always get the groceries!" Deflect.

DDD protects us from this by blocking out these painful attacks or neglects. With years of repetition, DDD causes the ears to close, the heart to harden and love to die. Jesus described this reality when his followers asked why Moses allowed divorce (*Deut 24:1*) but not he. Jesus said, *"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law."* (*Mk 10:5*)

Furthermore, Jesus warned us of a major cause of DDD. He said, *"Do not judge or you will be judged. And the way you judge you will be judged and the measure you use will be measured to you."* (*Mt 7:1*) Judgments trigger more judgments. They feed on each other like cancer cells that grow exponentially out of control. Ping. Pong. PING. PONG. **PING! PONG!**

We protect ourselves by denying our share of the responsibility for what's happened. Dr. Scott Peck, Christian psychiatrist and author of, *The Road Less Traveled*, wrote, *"Most people who come to see a psychiatrist are suffering from...disorders of responsibility."*¹ DDD is proof of this disorder. We deny in order to hide behind technicalities and assumptions. We defend to justify ourselves and we deflect so that the real issue never gets addressed. DDD is like a protective shield that bounces all responsibility back to the "enemy" – our spouse!

DDD destroys communication and ensures issues don't get resolved. The message never penetrates the other person's ears...or heart. Instead, issues get buried in counter-attacks or silent avoidance.

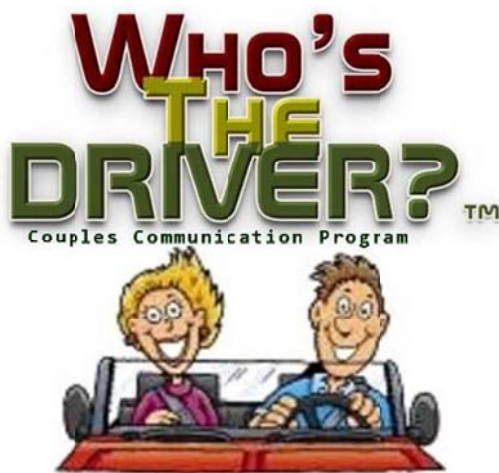
Once a couple comes out of protective mode they need a safe way to be truthful with each other. They need to overcome DDD so that real issues get addressed. What is their truth about money? About sex? About the household workload? About the kids? About everything you can think of... Couples need to get to know each other on a deeper level, and they need to be honest with themselves first and foremost.

Being truthful reveals the hurtful ways that couples use to control each other. This is the spiritual part of the journey. We either seek to control ourselves too much or our partner too much. This is behind every couple's power struggle. It is like driving a car. One spouse may be behind the wheel but either partner can try to control how the driver drives the car on that occasion. Enforcing what we want can sometimes lead to verbal and even physical abuse. Each of us must

1. *The Road Less Traveled*, Scott Peck, 1978, p35

take responsibility for our actions, repenting and forgiving repeatedly along the way. In order to get truth, we must learn to respect our partner by not judging, criticizing, shaming or condemning him or her.

One solution offered by The Institute for Present Living & Learning is a non-judgmental collaboration program called *Who's The Driver?*[™] It is for couples who want a truthful and respectful way to resolve issues and get happy. Developed by couples coach and business collaboration expert John Kuypers, it borrows a simple and effective leadership idea from the business world: **Who gets to decide?**



***Who's The Driver?* is like two people driving a car.** The driver is the one who “owns” the issue and the passenger is the one affected. Therefore, both have justifiable reasons to want to control where the “marriage-mobile” is going. But both cannot control the steering wheel or the car will crash. This is every couple's dilemma...who gets to decide on issues that matter to both. *Who's The Driver?*[™] provides a method and language to decide each partner's share of responsibility for any issue.

There is no need to Deny-Defend-Deflect when a couple agrees upfront on who gets to decide. That's because each person's responsibility is clear. Couples examine every aspect of their marriage and make clear decisions about who's the driver and what kind of driver. The program overcomes the blurriness that causes couples to blame and shame each other –

exactly what causes the DDD virus to become inflamed and communication to break down in the first place.

With time, consistency and persistence, the couple embraces each other's truth, accepting that which they cannot control and taking responsibility for that which they can control. Truth, when blended with tolerance, leads to a deeper trust. Love becomes vulnerable yet imperfect. As one recent participant wrote:

"John, thank you. We have been using many of your examples as we begin to engage (or) when we are in the middle of arguments or as I like to call them "intense" conversations. Your strategies have helped us regroup and regain ourselves."

***Who's The Driver?*[™] is non-judgmental.** This coaching program radically reduces the feeling of being personally attacked. Couples learn to “...first take the plank out of your own eye and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye,” as Jesus taught in Matthew 7:5. Love becomes spiritual and selfless, not romantic and needy. Marriage becomes what it is – a journey towards true spiritual love.

For couples entering marriage, we encourage a lifelong commitment to being truthful from the very beginning. For couples in a protective marriage, we encourage therapy to overcome the pent-up wounds of the past. For couples who have re-committed to having a truthful marriage and are struggling to respectfully resolve issues, we encourage them to learn how to make decisions more openly, safely and agreeably. For more information about the *Who's The Driver?*[™] couples collaboration program, go to www.whosthedriver.com.

*John Kuypers is a collaboration expert. He is founder and director of The Institute for Present Living & Learning, a Christian organization dedicated to helping people live and work together better. John is the author of three books including his latest, *Who's The Driver Anyway?* for business leaders on team collaboration. www.whosthedriveranyway.com.*